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SUBJECT: ASHGABAT HIGHLIGHTS FOR MARCH AND APRIL

REFERENCE A: Ashgabat 345  
REFERENCE B: Ashgabat 425

SUMMARY

1. (U) In March, post hosted two successful speaker programs [reftels A and B], a film festival to mark the end of Black History Month, and co-hosted Turkmenistan's third Fulbright Conference on Interdisciplinary Studies of the United States, focused on the theme of Rule of Law. Meanwhile, post's English Language Fellow, alumni and teachers continued to provide opportunities for teacher training in the regions, and many marked the dual Women's Day holidays by reflecting on women's rights in Turkmenistan. April saw debate preparations at the American Corners and Peace Corps sites blossom into the highly successful FLEX Regional Debate Tournament and the Peace Corps Model UN Tournament. The same cooperative effort made possible events in honor of Global Youth Service Day. End Summary.

Fulbright Conference Focuses on Rule of Law

2. (U) CI alumnus Serdar Jorayev took the lead in organizing the 2007 Turkmenistan Fulbright Conference, with funding from a Democracy Outreach Alumni grant. Held March 9 at Ashgabat's President Hotel, the conference featured U.S. speaker presentations on political communication by Dr. James Gregory Payne and human rights by Dr. Elbert Ransom. The event also included a presentation on English political and diplomatic phraseology and Internet communication by Ministry of Foreign Affairs representative Begench Karayev (himself a Fulbright alumnus) who last year had been unable to obtain his government's approval to attend. Over 105 alumni of post-high-school U.S. funded exchange programs participated in three concurrent sessions tied to the theme of rule of law: Legal Studies in Turkmenistan and the United States, Social and Political Development of Central Asian Countries and Teaching English for Specific Purposes. Presentations touched on a wide range of related themes.

3. (U) Funds from the grant supported publication of the presenters' theses in a conference booklet distributed at the conference and through the Public Affairs Section and American Corners throughout the year. (Comment: Publishing one's thesis is only a dream for most academics in Turkmenistan, as there are no independent printing presses and writers must incorporate praise of the Ruhnama and ruling regime into their works in order to improve chances of publication. End Comment.) Participant reaction to the conference was overwhelmingly positive, the result of all-too-infrequent exposure to such academic development opportunities. At least two participants discussed ideas for future projects with embassy staff, such as implementing web design training in universities and schools.

REGIONAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING BY FELLOW, ALUMNI

¶4. (U) On March 5, two 2006 FLEX alumni held their weekly English class for six children of the disabled at Turkmenbashy's Blind and Deaf Occupational Center -- a center established by Community Connection alumna with U.S. Government financial support. This class and others like it in other regions help mainstream a marginalized population, as there is virtually no de facto social support for disabled children in Turkmenistan.

¶5. (U) Later in the month, two participants in the 2006 International Teachers of English Conference in Ashgabat shared lessons from the conference about communicative teaching methodology with 10 Turkmenbashy teachers. The two-hour seminar on March 11 introduced the teachers to interactive teaching methods and Ashgabat-based resources such as the Embassy's Internet Resources Center and the Professional Organization of English Teachers (POET).

¶6. (U) Pending host government permission to conduct seminars on "Shaping the Way We Teach English: Successful Practices around the World" in state institutions, English Language Fellow John Mark King has been giving the workshop for local teachers at the American Corners in each region. On March 24, he held the seminar for 14 teachers at the Dashoguz American Corner. In addition to learning creative teaching methods, the teachers also used this opportunity to describe to King the challenges they faced in the classroom. In the absence of teachers' associations, such sessions provide both training and moral support for teachers who want to improve English language education in their schools.

¶7. (U) Meanwhile, two local teachers taught the first Dashoguz ACCESS class on March 9 for 11 students, at the American Corner. To help control ongoing host government acrimony over the nature of the program, King helped establish firm parameters for the participating teachers and chaired the student selection process. Basing the

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ACCESS classes at the Corner ensures a seamless follow-on for extracurricular activities and interaction between these beginning English students and the FLEX alumni who frequent the Center.

¶8. (U) Elsewhere in Dashoguz, a FLEX alumna in Gorogly etrap, organized an English language immersion and sports camp for 45 local secondary school students. School #7 hosted the camp for 4th-9th graders, which offered various sports sessions as well as English language and U.S History classes along with an American Movie night. The camp wedded physical fitness with English to encourage self-study among the participants, and as a way of plugging the students into the networking resource of the American Corner.

DEBATE SKILLS RECEIVE A BOOST

¶9. (U) Debate tournament and Model United Nations preparations continued through March at the American Corners, to culminate in an all-welayat FLEX-sponsored debate competition and a Peace Corps-organized annual Model UN conference on the theme of International Approaches to HIV/AIDS in Ashgabat in early and mid April. Both competitions were held in English among participants chosen for their commitment to several weeks of practice sessions. Critical thinking and unscripted, non-regime managed public speaking are both strongly discouraged in the current public education system. Thus, these programs are the only outlet for these types of activities.

GLOBAL YOUTH SERVICE DAY

¶10. (U) After wrangling for host government permission for the event for two weeks, over 100 local young adults, ACCELS, IREX and embassy staff and Peace Corps Volunteers participated in a successful clean up event in the mountains around Ashgabat on April 21. Despite the fact that the host government withheld its permission for the group to conduct this public service until the afternoon before the event, a state newspaper journalist attended the entire day and her highly positive coverage appeared on government website [www.turkmenistan.gov.tm](http://www.turkmenistan.gov.tm) on April 24. An alumni

grant supported the project -- an annual event in honor of Global Youth Service Day -- which resulted in the collection of two truckloads of garbage from the Akdere recreation area. The event is popular because it provides a sense of accomplishment while also promoting a sense of community and volunteerism.

¶12. (U). Over 200 local students celebrated Earth Day in each of Turkmenistan's regional cities Ashgabat, Balkanabat, Dashoguz, Mary and Turkmenabat with Earth Day activities aimed to protect our planet. Introducing Earth Day to young people and community members, GCE students and MITEs organized a series of clean-ups all over Turkmenistan. More than 800 young people cleaned regions parks, natural resorts, streets, and school yards. More than 30 students and teachers participated in a GCE live online discussion called Give Thanks to Earth. To prepare for the forum, participants conducted Web-based research on environmental issues and conservation. Students shared their opinions, knowledge, and observations and advocated for environmental conservation.

#### WOMEN SPOTLIGHTED IN MARCH

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¶13. (U) To commemorate International Women's Day on March 8 and Turkmenistan's Women's and Spring Holiday March 20-22, the American Corners hosted discussions and presentations on the women's rights movement and related themes. Two male FLEX alumni held a presentation on the women's rights movement for 17 Mary American Corner visitors on March 19. The alumni profiled several famous U.S. women and led a discussion on gender equality issues in Turkmenistan. On March 20, five Turkmenabat FLEX alumni organized a celebration of famous U.S. women for 30 American Corner visitors. After a presentation on selected womens' impact on U.S. society, attendees divided into two teams (boys versus girls) and debated the topic "Women are better leaders in society than men." In local society, where women are generally respected as family leaders, such discussions introduce local youth to the concept of political and economic equality and to the lively debate over civil rights in the United States.

¶14. (U) Late in March, the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) held two events on the theme of gender issues and discrimination with the American Bar Association's Central and Eastern European Law Initiative's (ABA/CEELI) Senior Legal Advisor Jacquelyn Foster. A one-day seminar on March 24 for UGRAD alumni at the ABA/CEELI conference room focused on domestic violence. Foster led a series of presentations and discussions on types of domestic violence, and international agreements to which Turkmenistan is a party. Alumni learned ways to provide assistance to victims of violence. Foster led a more general discussion on discrimination at the Internet Access and Training Program (IATP) site in Ashgabat on

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March 27 which included alumni from throughout Turkmenistan. Of particular interest was discrimination against non-Russian ethnic minorities in Russia, and general trends of discrimination in the United States. Candid discussions of gender and ethnic problems in the United States open a safe transition into discussions of these similar issues in the host country. In Turkmenistan's 'Golden Century' where life is perfect, such controversial issues are not discussed publicly.

#### LOCAL STUDENTS BRING PUBLIC HEALTH FORWARD

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¶15. (U) Seven students from the Turkmenabat medical vocational school prepared brochures in late March titled "Bird Flu and the Preventative Measures Against it" as a result of seminars on the subject held at the IATP site in Turkmenabat. As these future doctors prepared for their final exams at the region's sole medical institute, a lack of current medical resources at local libraries brought them to the IATP Center. During computer and Internet skills courses at the Center they learned how to research avian flu and to prepare their brochures. They will now provide these resources to their peers and public. The new booklet helps advertise the value of Internet access in plugging gaps in public health awareness.

¶16. (U) On April 11, the Tukrmenbashy American Corner staff, local alumni and a sports trainer conducted a karate competition for 30 young athletes from low-income families. The FLEX alumni served as judges in this event organized to promote teamwork and regular participation in sports activities. Physical education and organized sports competition have largely been removed from local life due to budget cuts to state agencies. Meanwhile, the need for such healthy activities is increased by the related issues of high unemployment, the lack of places in university, and the growing problem of drug use among youth.

#### INTERNET TECHNOLOGY AND ONLINE EXCHANGES

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¶17. (U) Working through the American Corners and when possible the IATP site, local teachers and students have been creating an Internet site about Turkmenistan, "Wiki Turkmenistan." In March, 75 current students, five FLEX alumni and eight trainers -- local secondary school teachers -- from Ashgabat, Turkmenabat, Mary and Dashoguz -- completed pages in Turkmen and Russian honoring famous Turkmen women, to mark International Women's Day. The trilingual site -- which provides users the power to edit and add content (<http://turkmenistan.wikispaces.com>)-- already contains over 276 pages.

¶18. (U) Freelance journalist and International Visitor Leadership Program alumna Sona Chuli Kuli held a workshop March 16-17 to train 15 high school and university students basic journalism skills. The workshop, held at the IREX Center in Ashgabat, was intended to increase participants' awareness of broadcast media methods and content, and improve their writing, editing, public speaking and interviewing skills. Participants discussed the relationship between media and the Internet while concentrating on the current restrictive environment for media in Turkmenistan. After the workshops, students also registered and started using the first stage of retired journalist Dina Bayborodina's distance learning course "The Journalism Kitchen," which includes online lectures, polls, puzzles, and forums to enhance the students' critical thinking and writing skills. Participants plan to organize a Young Journalists Club to write and share news on community events by creating an online website for the club. (Comment: No formal journalism studies are offered in Turkmenistan at secondary schools or higher education institutions. End Commend.)

¶19. (U). Interim Charg d'Affaires Ambassador Richard Hoagland discussed U.S. foreign policy and bilateral cooperation with over 60 Turkmen residents in an online forum on April 6. The one-hour online discussion in Russian, English and Turkmen (<http://forum.iatp.net/viewtopic.php?t=99>) included local journalists, government and NGO officials, alumni of US-government-sponsored exchange programs, disabled residents, and others who joined the forum from the IATP centers in Mary, Turkmenabat, Ashgabat, and the American Center Dashoguz. Participants submitted questions and Hoagland responded, clarifying points of bilateral policy and discussing ways in which post hopes to expand its work in Turkmenistan -- particularly in the field of education. These forums also help the local population to learn the importance that the United States places on development issues, and the U.S. government's desire to create a peaceful and collaborative partnership with Turkmenistan.

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